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ABSTRACT

Divorce can be viewed as a multi-faceted, interactive process which represents a dislocation in the life cycle of a family. A set of critical developmental tasks must be met and mastered for a family to cope with the transition through the divorce experience. The first of these developmental challenges facing the children of divorcing parents is their acceptance of the reality of the parental divorce. A study was undertaken to explore the relationship among attributes of the child, characteristics of the parent-child relationship, and characteristics of the divorcing experience as these variables influence the child's reliance on denial in fantasy as a mechanism of defense in response to parental separation. Latency aged children (N=42) and a matched sample of 30 children from intact homes completed the Child's Report of the Impact of Separation by Parents-Revised, the Children's Personality Questionnaire, and the Child's Cognitive Grasp of the Divorcing Experience measure. Mothers of all the children completed a series of questionnaires designed to measure the variables under investigation. Multiple regression analysis revealed that the most significant predictor of a child's reliance on denial in fantasy in response to parental separation was the set of variables representing the attributes of the child. Specifically, the child's age at the time of parental separation was the most powerful predictor of reliance on denial, representing 41 percent of all variance. These results suggest that very definite age-related responses to parental separation may be observed and that denial will be seen most often in younger children. (NRB)

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CHILDREN'S RELIANCE ON DENIAL IN FANTASY IN RESPONSE TO PARENTAL SEPARATION AND DIVORCE

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Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, 93rd, Los Angeles, CA, August 23-27, 1985.

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Abstract of paper presented at the meetings of the American Psychological Convention, Los Angeles, CA, August 1985.

Children's Reliance on Denial in Fantasy in Response to Parental Separation and Divorce

Susan M. Wax, Ph.D.

The current investigation attempted to assess the multi-faceted and interactive process of divorce as a dislocation in the life cycle of a family. Specifically, the study explored the relationship between attributes of the child, characteristics of the parent-child relationship, and characteristics of the divorcing experience, as these variables influence the child's reliance on denial in fantasy as a mechanism of defense in reponse to parental separation. The outcome variable, denial, was assessed by a semi-projective instrument devised by the author.

The sample for the research project consisted of 42 latency-aged children of separated parents and their mothers, and a matched sample of 30 children from intact homes and their mothers. Multiple regression analyses revealed that the most significant predictor of a child's reliance on denial in fantasy in response to parental separation was the set of variables representing the attributes of the child. Specifically, a child's age at the time of parental separation was the single most powerful predictor of his/her reliance on denial.

The discussion focused on the age-related correlates of reliance on the denial mechanism in response to the stress, crisis, and loss associated with the divorcing experience. Further, implications drawn from results of the research were presented to assist those working with divorcing families.

Paper presented at the meetings of the American Psychological Association Convention. August, 1985. Los Angeles, CA.

Children's Reliance on Denial in Fantasy in Response to Parental Seperation and Divorce

Susan M. Wax, Ph.D.

The increasing frequency of parental divorce, coupled with the potentially lengthy duration of psychological sequelae experienced by children of divorcing parents, make research on the paradigms of divorce an area of timely and critical importance for all mental health professionals working with families. Drawing from the family life span theorists, such as Carter and McGoldgrick, and the existing divorce literature, especially the major contributions of Wallerstein and Kelly, it is instructive to view the divorcing experience as a multi-faceted, interactive process which represents a dislocation in the life cycle of a family--one which affects all family members in a variety of ways.

Further, following the paradigms for stage-specific responses to loss, death and crisis found in the works of Bowlby, Kubler-Ross, and Caplan, it is possible to identify a set of critical developmental tasks which must be met and mastered for a family to navigate the transition through the divorcing experience.

The current study was an empirical exploration of the first of these developmental challenges facing the children of divorcing parents, that is, their acceptance of the reality of parental divorce. Drawing from defense theory, as represented in the psychoanalytic ego psychology literature, especially the works of

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Anna Freud, the research assessed the individual and interactional variables which contribuute to a child's successful resolution and acceptance of parental divorce. Specifically, this study examined the relationship between three sets of variables representing attributes of the child, characteristics of the parent-child relationship and characteristics of the divorcing experience as these factors influence the child's reliance on denial in fantasy as a mechanism of defense in response to parental separation.

First, I will highlight the theoretical perspective for viewing the child's denial in response to the loss and crisis of divorce:

The divorcing experience may be viewed as a profoundly distressful succession of events. The numerous losses and partial losses are followed by demands to accommodate and adapt to reactive changes in family members and their relationships with one another. While divorce may offer an opportunity to relieve one set of stresses, the separation and the ensuing period of transition most often generates additional and often unanticipated stress. Family members face emotional and practical tasks as they seek to resolve feelings and issues and to progress with individual and family development. Further, what serves as a solution to one family member may represent a problem to another. Moreover, the child of divorcing parents is imploded with experiences of successive loss and stress which may overwhelm an immature and undeveloped defensive structure.

The child's initial inability to acknowledge the divorce of

his/her parents may be understood as a defensive measure which serves adaptive ends. Despite the reality demands represented by the actual parental separation, there are specific characteristics which tend to foster the child's continued denial of the divorcing experience and his/her wishful fantasies of reconciliation. First, there are developmental considerations. The child has not yet developed an adequate repertoire of coping mechanisms. The feelings associated with the divorcing experience may seem overwhelming, leaving the child to feel helpless, angry, sad, guilty or anxious. He/she may find comfort only in soothing fantasies of the predivorce family. Second, the diminished capacity to parent displayed by divorcing spouses may lead to the child's experience of frustration, as he/she strives to have dependency and nurturance needs met by unresponsive parents. The child may revert to regressed modes of behavior and to reliance on more primitive means of defense, such as denial in fantasy. Finally, the ambiguous nature of the divorcing experience coupled with the parents' frequent attempts to shield the child from the realities of the divorce brings a sense of partial loss and partial gratification, lacking in definition and finality. This may create feelings of confusion which support the child's fantasy that the divorce can be magically undone.

Turning now to the methodology employed in the current investigation:

This study identified a series of salient factors which may influence the denial process in response to divorce. Specifically,

one set of variables represented the child's age, the child's level of psychological adjustment, and the child's cognitive grasp of the divorcing experience. A second set of variables represented the parent's reliance on denial, the parent's encouragement of expression of feelings, and the clarity of explanation about the divorce given to the child. A third set of variables represented the length of time of the parental separation and the degree of postseparation interparental tension. The outcome variable, denial, was assessed by a semi-projective instrument devised by the author.

The research sample was drawn from a predominantly white, middle-class population from the greater Los Angeles area. The sample consisted of 42 children between the ages of 8 and 13 whose parents had separated within the previous 3 years and their mothers, plus a matched sample of 30 children from intact homes and their mothers. Mothers completed a series of questionnaires devised to measure the variables under investigation, while children completed the Child's Report of the Impact of Separation by Parents-Revised, the Children's Personality Questionnaire, and the Child's Cognitive Grasp of the Divorcing Experience.

A series of multiple regression analyses was conducted on the three sets of variables. Additionally, a series of t-tests was conducted to explore differences between children from divorcing families and children from intact homes.

Results of the multiple regression analyses revealed that the most significant predictor of a child's reliance on denial in

fantasy in response to parental separation was the set of variables representing the attributes of the child. Specifically, a child's age at the time of parental separation was the most powerful predictor of reliance on denial, representing 41% of all variance. Further, results indicated that the child's reliance on the denial mechanism was impervious to the influence of those factors relating to the characteristics of the parent-child relationship and those measuring the nature and quality of the divorcing experience.

The most striking results obtained from the regression analyses elucidate the nature of the denial process. That is, the denial mechanism may be viewed as a primitive means to avoid facing the stresses and conflicts of reality. Denial remains available in times of stress, yet fades as a preferred means of coping as the individual matures and gains greater reliance on more highly-developed ego mechanisms. It may be speculated that the younger child lacks a fully developed sense of reality-testing. He/she does not yet have a full appreciation of time lapses, nor of abstract concepts, such as "divorce". Such a youngster approaches the divorcing experience with a concrete attitude and with reliance on denial. Older children appear to rely on denial far less frequently. This does not mean that older children are less affected or better-adjusted than younger children, as they may rely on alternative means of coping in lieu of the primitive denial mechanism. Results of the current study strongly suggest that very definite age-related responses to

parental separation may be observed and further, that denial will be seen most often in younger children.

The two factors, other than age, which emerged as powerful variables associated with a child's reliance on denial were adjustment and cognition. With regard to adjustment, the degree to which a child evidenced personality traits considered to be neurotic or maladaptive related to his/her increased reliance on denial. This finding leads to the speculation that continued reliance on denial, particularly in the older child, may be viewed as pathological, that is, not associated with the "norm". Thus the younger child may be utilizing denial in an adaptive manner, while the older child's denial may be maladaptive.

The relationship between cognition and denial is more complex. It may be speculated that the cognitive and denial processes are interrelated means of perceiving and processing information. Both involve an oscillation between two extreme poles, until final integration occurs. In denial, a splitting of the ego allows the individual to waver between denial and acceptance. In cognition, the indivdual must assimilate and accommodate new information. The cognitive process interacts with the denial process in a manner which allows the integration of internal ideas and affective states. Results of the current study suggest that there is a reciprocal relationship between cognition and denial such that a clear cognitive grasp of the divorcing experience contributes to less denial, and more acceptance of the reality of divorce contributes to a better understanding. Thus,

attention must be given to both cognitive and affective components when assessing the impact of divorce on children.

Results of t-tests yielded much data regarding the nature of divorce and the ways in which children from divorcing families are similar to and differ from children from intact families. Results indicated no differences between these two groups with regard to preferred style of coping with conflicts generated by stories about the divorcing experience. To some degree, these findings may be explained by the developmental process, as previously discussed, at least with regard to denial. Another explanation of this striking finding may relate to sociocultural influences. The increasingly common occurrence and greater general acceptance of divorce, coupled with the proliferation of divorce-related stories and role models in the media may be viewed as a major influence in creating and perpetuating the heightened awareness of the social reality of divorce for children today.

The differences found between children from divorcing families and children from intact families raise several areas of concern. Children of separated parents emerged as more anxious, apprehensive, and emotionally vulnerable than their counterparts from intact families. In fact, children in the control group obtained scores reflecting a higher degree of emotional stability and security. Further, results indicated that children of divorcing families were more shrewd and aggressive than children from intact families. In contrast, control group youngsters responded in a manner reflecting a more naive, uncritical and

obedient approach to life. Further, children of divorcing parents did less well at school, academically and behaviorally, than did children from intact families. It may be that the divorcing experience accelerates a type of social development and hastens an awareness of relationships and life issues. Divorcing parents may make more maturity demands on their as-yet unprepared youngsters, who may respond with rebellion and defiance at home and at school.

One final set of findings is worth noting. That is, the significant relationships found between characteristics of the parent-child relationship and the child's propensity to select story endings reflecting adaptive resolutions to conflicts about the divorcing experience. Results revealed that those parents who had informed their children about the causes and subsequent effects of parental separation and those parents who were able to maintain a positive emotional climate with their spouses subsequent to the separation were more likely to have children who were able to respond adaptively to conflicts related to the divorcing experience. It may be speculated that when divorcing parents relate positively to their children and to one another, their children are better able to adjust to the divorce.

In summary, the current investigation has made a significant contribution to the field of family research. The results provide some preliminary empirical data from which to generate speculations regarding denial and divorce.

The major contribution of this study has been the demonstration of the developmental nature of the denial process.

This theoretical framework provides a meaningful way in which to to view normative and maladaptive reliance on denial. Further, a developmental model allows for a study of age-related behavioral, cognitive, and affective correlates to denial.

With regard to the divorcing experience, the current investigation has demonstrated several salient components which contribute to a child's adjustment to parental divorce. In addition to the age-related patterns of responses, the study has shown that children's adjustment to parental separation is linked with parents' ability to prepare their children prior to divorce, parents' ability to anticipate and to encourage their children's needs to question and explore their feelings about the divorce, and also parents' ability to maintain a positive relationship with one another subsequent to their separation. In effect, the study has provided evidence that children's adjustment to parental separation and divorce is affected by levels of individual functioning and levels of family functioning.

Finally, the current study offers several important implications for clinicians to work preventatively and therapeutically with divorcing families. An awareness of both normative and maladaptive responses to parental separation equips the clinician with the means to evaluate and to intervene effectively. Additionally, the differences in responses to parental separation observed due to the age of the child provide guidelines for charting expectable reactions to parental divorce and for identifying pathological alternatives.

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